Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Coeducational Jewish Education

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There is little question that Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s decision to maintain a coeducational framework at the Maimonides School in Boston has been repercussive. Rabbi Soloveitchik, or “The Rav” as he was known to his students, was a towering intellectual figure of American Orthodoxy in the twentieth century; and thus, his opinions and approaches carried and still carry significant weight in contemporary Jewish practice and thought. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Rav’s approach has been the subject of much debate, particularly as Orthodoxy has gained a greater foothold in American Jewish life, and as conservative ideologies which accentuate traditional roles (and who insist upon a maximalist position regarding gender separation) have gained greater currency.[i] Although the historical record demonstrates that Rabbi Soloveitchik had addressed his opinion regarding girls studying alongside boys, and we now can read his response with clarity, questions still remain regarding the application of his ideas to contemporary Jewish life.

In the last decade, new material has emerged regarding Rabbi Soloveitchik’s position on this critical dimension of Jewish education. Nati Helfgot published two letters from Rabbi Soloveitchik addressed to Rabbi Leonard Rosenfeld, the then director of the Education Committee of the Hebrew Institute of Long Island (HILI), whose principal at the time was Rabbi Harold Leiman. These letters make a strong case for coeducation in the context that I described in my book about Maimonides School.

This essay publishes for the first time, two of the letters written by Rabbi Rosenfeld to Rabbi Soloveitchik, which facilitated the response of Rabbi Soloveitchik (published by Helfgot). These letters illuminate Rabbi Soloveitchik’s attitude and provide vital context to Rabbi Soloveitchik’s letters regarding Torah education for girls.

Background[ii]

More than thirty years ago, the prominent Israeli educator Mordechai Bar Lev visited the Maimonides School in Boston and was shocked by what he saw: "For an Israeli visitor like myself," he wrote, "the phenomenon of coeducation through all grades was striking."[iii] The fact that Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, an Orthodox scholar from a decidedly yeshiva oriented family, was the founder of the Maimonides School and continued to serve as the spiritual force behind its educational philosophy, certainly puzzled Bar Lev.

In fact, the question of coeducation at Maimonides has plagued scholars and educators for years, given that coeducation is generally not associated with the Orthodox community. One of the most prominent students of Rabbi Soloveitchik, Rabbi Hershel Schachter, expressed one point of view:

When a religious high school opened in a large North American city, and it was mentioned to our rabbi [Soloveitchik] that the classes were mixed and that boys and girls studied together based on the model of *yeshivat Rambam* in Boston, our rabbi was amazed. He said: "But in that city there were always separate schools for boys and girls, and what circumstance forced them to open a new mixed school? In Boston [Rabbi Soloveitchik] was forced to behave this way for he only had two options: to be guilty of limiting education for girls or to be guilty of opening a coeducational school. He was forced into choosing the lesser of two evils, and he reasoned that given the contemporary circumstances, this decision was less problematic. But in other times in other places, where there are already schools that separate boys and girls and there is no need to act as such, it is certainly completely incorrect to do so. [iv]

According to Rabbi Schachter, Rabbi Soloveitchik was forced into organizing a coeducational school because of pressing circumstances. Coeducation, in Rabbi Schachter's view, was the lesser of two evils, the alternative being no schooling for girls at all. Rabbi Schachter does not deny that the school was coeducational or that coeducation was an innovation. Instead, he suggests that given the considerations of the time, coeducation was the best alternative for Rabbi Soloveitchik. Rabbi Schachter's evaluation of Rabbi Soloveitchik's innovation implies that the primary motivation for creating a coeducational school was based on practical and pragmatic considerations, not on educational or *halakhic* ones.[v] Striking in Rabbi Schachter's formulation is the testimony regarding the applicability of the Maimonides School model around America, without the knowledge of Rabbi Soloveitchik, and apparently –according to Rabbi Schachter – against Rabbi Soloveitchik's will.

A second group of Rabbi Soloveitchik's students asserted that coeducation was perceived by Rabbi Soloveitchik as an educational ideal or at least an educational issue. This perspective was advanced by Benny Brama, a former teacher at the Maimonides School, in an interview with the International Bnei Akiva movement. Brama suggested that Rabbi Soloveitchik anticipated the value of mixed education and that he deliberately and consciously created a school that implemented this belief.

Coeducation causes less sexual and social tension and brings, both within and without the yeshiva or school, a richer and healthier social life. Particularly in light of the sexual impropriety and the looseness that may be found all over America, Rabbi Soloveitchik's educational approach in the Rambam Yeshiva in Boston stands out positively, ([for] all the classes in the yeshiva are mixed, and the boys and girls are required to conform to the daily schedule that includes *shacharit* and *mincha*). Only a great thinker and halakhist like him, who understands that one should confront rather than flee from contemporary realities, could have established a yeshiva with this educational approach.[vi]

Another student of Rabbi Soloveitchik also wrote about Rabbi Soloveitchik and coeducation.

The co-educational nature of Maimonides School leaves many, even avowed disciples of the Rav, uncomfortable. Contrary to reasons offered in certain circles, I understood that the Rav viewed co-education not as a halakhic issue, but rather as an educational question, one to be examined through the

prism of sound educational philosophy and tested in the laboratory of life.[vii]
Brama's argument suggests that the decision to implement coeducation at Maimonides should be understood as part of Rabbi Soloveitchik's broader interest in integrating Jewish and modern culture.
A third group of Rabbi Soloveitchik's students did not attempt to justify the innovations as did Rabbi Schachter, or represent them as an educational ideal, as Meier and Brama did, but rather, denied that such an innovation ever obtained. Rabbi Leon Mozeson, a teacher at the school in the 1960s wrote that Meier's statements were "simply not true" and that Rabbi Soloveitchik had instructed him to separate boys and girls in his classroom.[viii] Rabbi Mozeson's testimony as to his personal classroom conduct cannot be disputed but it is clear that most of the faculty at the school did not adopt his rigorous conservative posture. When Rabbi Soloveitchik visited classrooms, he was well aware that students were intermingled and sat and studied together.

When I last addressed this issue in writing, I wrote that Rabbi Soloveitchik left no written testimony that might explain the ideology behind coeducation. However, subsequent to the publication of my book, two letters were published by Nati Helfgot that illustrate Rabbi Soloveitchik's attitude towards coeducation in the contemporary context. It is to these letters that we now turn our attention.

The Rosenfeld Letters

In the introductory paragraph to Rabbi Soloveitchik's letters on girls studying Talmud, Helfgot writes that

Rabbi Leonard Rosenfeld…wrote the Rav with a series of questions regarding the teaching of Talmud to elementary and high school age girls….The Rav… soon replied indicating that he would not answer these questions directly until he was assured that the education committee would agree to strictly abide by his rulings and guidelines.

The full text of Rabbi Soloveitchik's letter, as published by Helfgot reads

Dear Rabbi Rosenfeld,
I acknowledge receipt of your letter. In my answer to your previous inquiry concerning the permissibility of instruction of girls in Talmud I stressed that unless I am assured in advance by the school administration that my recommendations will be followed I would not take the trouble to investigate the matter. Since such an official assurance has been withheld (your letter did not contain any such commitment) I must decline to consider the controversial problem. The reason for my reluctance to engage in this controversial issue is the unique stand taken by many of our Jews on matters of Law and tradition. We have reached a stage at which party lines and political ideologies influence our halakhic thinking to the extent that people cannot rise above partisan issue to the level of Halakhah-objectivity. Some are in a perennial quest for "liberalization" of the Law and its subordination to the majority opinion of a political legislative body, while others would like to see the Halakhah fossilized and completely shut out of life. I am not inclined to give any of these factions an opportunity for nonsensical debates. [ix]

This letter is suggestive on three fronts. First of all, it indicates that the letter was not the first time that Rabbi Rosenfeld and Rabbi Soloveitchik had discussed this issue. In fact, the response of Rabbi Soloveitchik (or perhaps more accurately, his unwillingness to respond) was precipitated by the inability to receive guarantees that his position would be adhered to. Secondly, Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests that he needed to investigate the matter. It is unclear whether he means that what had been

taking place at Maimonides School (for at least six years prior to these letters) was not investigated, or that the model of Maimonides would be irrelevant to the school in Long Island. But most importantly, this letter makes it abundantly clear that the Rav was well aware of the political hot-potato that girls studying Talmud represented (as well as the issue of coeducation as will become clear below) and that he was cognizant of the fact that this issue was not only controversial but also repercussive. Unlike Rabbi Schachter's assertion, Rabbi Soloveitchik seems in this letter to be writing decisively and consciously.

Rabbi Soloveitchik's engagement in the issue of women studying Talmud and coeducation becomes illuminated by the letter which yielded the response above.
On January 12, 1953, Rabbi Rosenfeld wrote that the issue of girls studying Talmud at HILI (and ostensibly, coeducation as well) had been the subject of discussions and letters between Rabbi Rosenfeld and Rabbi Soloveitchik Before addressing a set of questions to Rabbi Soloveitchik, Rabbi Rosenfeld's letter begins:
A while back I contacted your honor orally and in writing regarding the teaching of Torah She B'al Peh to girls in elementary yeshivot (and in high schools) in general, and in the Yeshiva of Far Rockaway specifically. In your answer, you set forth conditions upon which you would investigate the matter and the details of the Halakhot connected to them. I am pleased to report that I passed on your words to the education committee of the yeshiva, and we concluded that we would be very grateful if you would consider investigating this question and we certainly from our side, will accept all the conditions. [x]
From the letter it is clear that Rabbi Soloveitchik's response, particularly the words "investigate the matter", were drawn from Rosenfeld's letter. But while Rabbi Soloveitchik adopted the terminology, he added the words "controversial" leaving no doubt that Rabbi Soloveitchik was aware of the consequences of what he would ultimately write.

The questions of the Educational Committee were, as cited in the letter from Rabbi Rosenfeld to Rabbi Soloveitchik:

1. Is it desirable to teach the Oral law to girls?
2. Is it permitted to teach the Oral law to girls?
3. Is there a halakhic difference between Talmud, Mishna, Aggada, and Halakha Psuka?
4. Is there a halakhic difference between surface study and in depth study?

As the above cited letter indicates, Rabbi Soloveitchik initially refused to respond. However four days later, Rabbi Rosenfeld issued a clarification. In a letter (this time, typed in English rather than handwritten in Hebrew, not printed on school stationery, and addressed curiously to **Dr.** Joseph Soloveitchik), dated January 27, 1953, Rabbi Rosenfeld again turned to the Rav. He wrote:
I am terribly sorry if my letter outlining the question was not as clear as I thought it was.
The matter was thoroughly discussed in the committee as well as the entire Board. It was moved, adopted and so recorded in the minutes that we shall be bound by your decision on the matter. There is thus a binding commitment on our part that this is halakha l'maaseh and not just derush ve-kabel s'khar.
I, therefore, hope that since this condition has now been fulfilled that you will favor us with your responsum.
This question is framed in halakhic terminology. But more importantly, it illustrates the extent to which the topic of girls' education was discussed on multiple levels within the Long Island Orthodox community of the 1950s. Clearly Rabbi Soloveitchik understood, at least at this point, that whatever answers he provided would be taken seriously, both as halakhic decisions, and as policy.

It took Rabbi Soloveitchik more than four months to respond. In the interim, it appears that Rabbi Rosenfeld sent Rabbi Soloveitchik a number of additional letters as well. On May 27th, 1953, Rabbi

Soloveitchik wrote a letter to Rabbi Rosenfeld through the offices of Rabbi Leo Jung.

Dear Rabbi Rosenfeld:
Please accept my apologies for not answering your letters sooner. The delay was due to my overcrowded schedule. As to your question with regard to a curriculum in a coeducational school, I expressed my opinion to you long ago that it would be a very regrettable oversight on our part if we were to arrange separate Hebrew courses for girls. Not only is the teaching of Torah she-be-al peh to girls permissible but it is nowadays an absolute imperative. This policy of discrimination between the sexes as to subject matter and method of instruction which is still advocated by certain groups within our Orthodox community has contributed greatly to the deterioration and downfall of traditional Judaism. Boys and girls alike should be introduced to the inner halls of Torah she-be-al peh.
I hope to prepare in the near future a halakhic brief on the same problem which will exhaust the various aspects of the same. In the meantime I heartily endorse a uniform program for the entire student body.

To be sure, this letter makes it very clear that Rabbi Soloveitchik was disdainful of a model of Torah education that discriminated against girls. Moreover, he ascribes to unequal education a desiccating quality that he feels partly rendered Orthodoxy irrelevant on the contemporary scene. His lashing out against the ultra-Orthodox, who at the time were only a small percentage of American Orthodoxy, is remarkable, given his Lithuanian Orthodox background.

Rabbi Soloveitchik's response does not frontally address the issue of coeducation as a halakhic desideratum. Rather, it takes for granted that, in the case that was presented to him, coeducation is a norm. Nonetheless, he is careful to note that having separate Hebrew courses for boys and girls is ultimately problematic for a resilient Orthodoxy, at least as long as the girls will not be treated as seriously as the boys.

It is always tempting to seek to apply one response, given in one set of circumstances, to a wider set of circumstances. Rabbi Soloveitchik, in fact, did not support coeducation in the Yeshiva College campus,[xi] even though he was probably aware that at the time, the women of Stern College would not receive the same Torah education as the men of Yeshiva College.

Nonetheless, each situation must be viewed within and through the local prism. It is conceivable that two locales might share Orthodox ideologies, but emerge with two radically different schools, depending on whether the instructors are capable and willing to provide equal education for boys and girls. Within contemporary Jewish life, this situation can vary from community to community.

In the two letters cited above, Rabbi Soloveitchik affirms, in remarkably stark terminology, that equal (and qualitative) Torah education for boys and girls is a necessary component of a vibrant and dynamic contemporary Jewish life. Since the Rav was aware of the opposition to his approach within the ultra-Orthodox community, he had planned to write a more detailed paper. One can only speculate whether he meant for such a detailed brief to serve as a road map for contemporary Orthodox girls' education, since no such paper has, as of yet, been published.

Conclusion

Rabbi Soloveitchik's affirmation of coeducation as a legitimate educational alternative continues to be repercussive, often in ironic ways. In her striking defense of single sex education, Elana Maryles Sztokman recently wrote

"This topic is of particular interest in the Jewish world, in which single sex education is often seen as "old" while coed is seen as more progressive. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, for example, promoted the

Maimonides coed Orthodox day school in the 1950s, as a "modern" answer to single-sex education. In practice, however, just because boys and girls are in the same building, and possibly even learning the same texts, they are not experiencing the same educational experiences and opportunities. The problems that exist in coed classes in public schools - boys dominating math and science, boys interrupting and harassing girls, boys dominating teacher attention - undoubtedly exist in Jewish schools as well. They may even be bigger problems in Jewish schools. We would not know because the subject of gender in the Jewish day school system has not been adequately researched." [xii]

The stationery of the Hebrew Institute of Long Island carries the motto "To carry on the golden tradition of Jewish learning in a progressive American school." HILI, Maimonides, and many other Orthodox day schools have continued the practice of coeducation since the 1960s, even though its progressive character might today be questioned. The fact that coeducation in the general Orthodox community has not been adopted,[xiii] should not deter the Jewish community from stating what the evidence demonstrates: Rabbi Soloveitchik understood that the only way to ensure equal education was to provide a coeducational environment. In many communities that was true in the 1950s. And in many communities, that remains true today.

[i] See Seth Farber, An American Orthodox Dreamer (Hanover:2004), 68-87.
[ii] Much of this section is a reiteration of the section in my book that addresses this issue.
[iii] Mordechai Bar-Lev, "*Tatzpit al Shtei me-Archot shel Chinuch Yehudi ba-Gola*," *Niv HaMidrashia* 2 (1979), p. 310.
[iv] H. Schachter, p. 55. Rabbi Schachter's opinion echoes that of an earlier halakhic authority, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein. See Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *Igrot Moshe* Yoreh De'ah 1:137; Yoreh De'ah 3:78; Yoreh De'ah 4:28. Rabbi Feinstein begrudgingly granted that circumstances might force a coeducational school to operate for younger students, but he refused to allow older students to study together. Notwithstanding the conservative approach of Rabbi Feinstein, many modern Orthodox schools were coeducational though the practice of segregating boys and girls for *limmudei kodesh* became commonplace in the 1960s.
[v] Rabbi Schachter cites Rabbi Soloveitchik's son-in-law, Rabbi Yitzchak Twersky, as a source for this statement. This statement could not be fully corroborated, and Rabbi Twersky's full engagement with all aspects of the school until his death in 1997 suggests that he did not subscribe to such a belief. Dr. Atarah Twersky, Rabbi Soloveitchik's daughter, was similarly involved with the school despite the coeducational format. All of Rabbi Soloveitchik's grandchildren who lived in Boston attended the school.
[vi] Benny Brama, "*Al Shitat ha-Rav Soloveitchik*," in Amnon Shapira (ed.), *Chevrah Meurevet Banim u'Banot be-Bnei Akiva be-Yameynu* (Bnei Akiva, 1981), pp. 58-59.
[vii] Menachem Meier, "Maimonides School and the Rav," *Tradition* 31:3 (1997), p. 116.
[viii] Leon Mozeson, "Maimonides School and the Rav," *Tradition* 32:1 (Fall, 1997), pp. 101-102.
[ix] Helfgot, 82.
[x] My thanks to Ezra Rosenfeld who provided me with copies of his father's letters.
[xi] See Yehudah L. Rosenblatt, "The Conundrum of Coeducation at Yeshiva" in Commentator, November 29, 2006.
[xii] "When Segregated Education Works," Jerusalem Post, April 1, 2008.
[xiii] Elizabeth Weil, "Should Boys and Girls Be Taught Separately," The New York Times Magazine, March 2, 2008.